



Tom Scarritt

High gas will drive changes

No one wants to pay more for gasoline. No one wants to pay more taxes. A majority of Americans, though, say they would support a higher federal tax on gasoline if it helped reduce our dependence on imported oil or reduce global warming.

Those findings, from a recent New York Times/CBS News poll, could be the foundation for a real energy policy in this country. What we have now is an undeclared but consistent policy that is leading us in the wrong direction. That policy, says Car and Driver editor Csaba Csere, is simple: "Keep energy as cheap as possible for as long as possible."

That leads us to seek oil wherever we can get the lowest price, without regard to what that does to our national security. It leads us to burn all the fuel we can find, without regard to what that does to our environment. It takes away much of the incentive to be more efficient.

When pollsters posed their question purely as a tax issue, 85 percent of the respondents preferred the present policy. They said they would oppose an increased gasoline tax. The results changed dramatically, though, if the tax would enhance our independence and our environment. Taxes for those purposes receive 55 and 59 percent support.

We know we have a problem. Even before President Bush made our oil addiction a part of his State of the Union address, Americans were concerned about the ill effects of that addiction.

Knowing we have a problem, though, is not enough to curb our consumption. Even shocks such as the spike in gas prices after Hurricane Katrina sparked only limited interest in smaller cars or alternatives such as hybrids, carpools or mass transit.

We need a solution that is as big and as lasting as the problem. Columnist Thomas Friedman, writing about The New York Times poll, said: "The Energy Question is the big strategic issue of our time, overtaking 9/11 and the war on terrorism." The issues are related, of course, as oil revenues finance enemies of democracy.

We have tried other ways of reducing consumption, such as encouraging mass transit and requiring car makers to meet fuel efficiency standards. This newspaper supports both those initiatives. But neither has proved strong enough to change our behavior.

There is no magic bullet. People are not burning to ride buses, if only they were more available. The car makers are not hiding some secret high-mileage technology they will bring out if the Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards are raised high enough. Progress in cutting consumption will be incremental, and it will be market driven.

High gasoline prices in Europe have affected both technology and consumer choices. A higher gasoline tax could have the same effect here, and it could be offset by other tax breaks to keep low-income workers from bearing too much of the burden.

Moving away from our cheap-at-any-cost approach to energy policy in this country is a big step, and it will involve some sacrifices. It should be carefully debated, so we come up with a strategy that really works. A large number of Americans, it now appears, are willing to consider a higher gasoline tax as part of that strategy.

Tom Scarritt is editor of The News. His e-mail address is tscarritt@bhamnews.com.

Despite terrorism ties, UAE is an ally

By BLAKE PRITCHETT

When Attorney General Alberto Gonzales stopped in Birmingham recently, he predictably

Alabama native and UAB graduate Blake Pritchett is a research analyst at the Center for International Trade and Security. E-mail: dblakep@uga.edu.

argued that the decision to allow Dubai Ports World (owned by the United Arab Emirates) to take over the operations of six major ports in the United States was vetted through the normal Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States process that considered a variety of concerns regarding U.S. port security.

Despite this, the latest polling shows 64 percent of Americans are opposed to

allowing the deal to occur. Alabama's congressional delegation, which tilts heavily Republican, is leaning toward opposition. The proposed plan does not impact operations at the Port of Mobile, but it is still important for Alabama lawmakers, the media and the public to understand what is at stake in the Dubai deal and how it relates to our homeland security.

The main points of contention relate

to UAE's past connections to terrorism. The UAE has been suspected of serving as a transfer point for illicit shipments of nuclear materials to Iran, North Korea and Libya. The Federal Bureau of Investigation claims UAE financial networks were used in a money-laundering scheme to finance some of the 9/11 hijackers. The UAE was one of only three

► See UAE, Page 8B

With open arms

UA welcomes cigarette makers to campus

By ALAN BLUM

More than 40 years after U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry, an Alabamian, published the landmark report "Smoking and Health," the toll taken by tobacco is greater than ever.

The 1964 indictment of cigarettes as a principal cause of lung cancer and other diseases should have marked the beginning of the end of the Marlboro Man. But far from heading off into the sunset, the tobacco industry has more than met the challenge of keeping America smoking. The sad result is that cigarette smoking remains the nation's No. 1 avoidable health problem, accounting for 440,000 deaths a year.

In Alabama alone, annual deaths from cigarette-related diseases such as emphysema, heart attack, stroke and lung cancer total 7,600, more than all the deaths from AIDS, illegal drugs, alcohol, motor vehicle accidents, homicides and suicides combined. Among all states, Alabama trails only Kentucky and Mississippi in the percentage of men who smoke (29 percent). In the 18-24 age group, more young women are lighting up than men. Overall, 25 percent of the state's 4.5 million population smokes, compared with the national average of 20 percent.

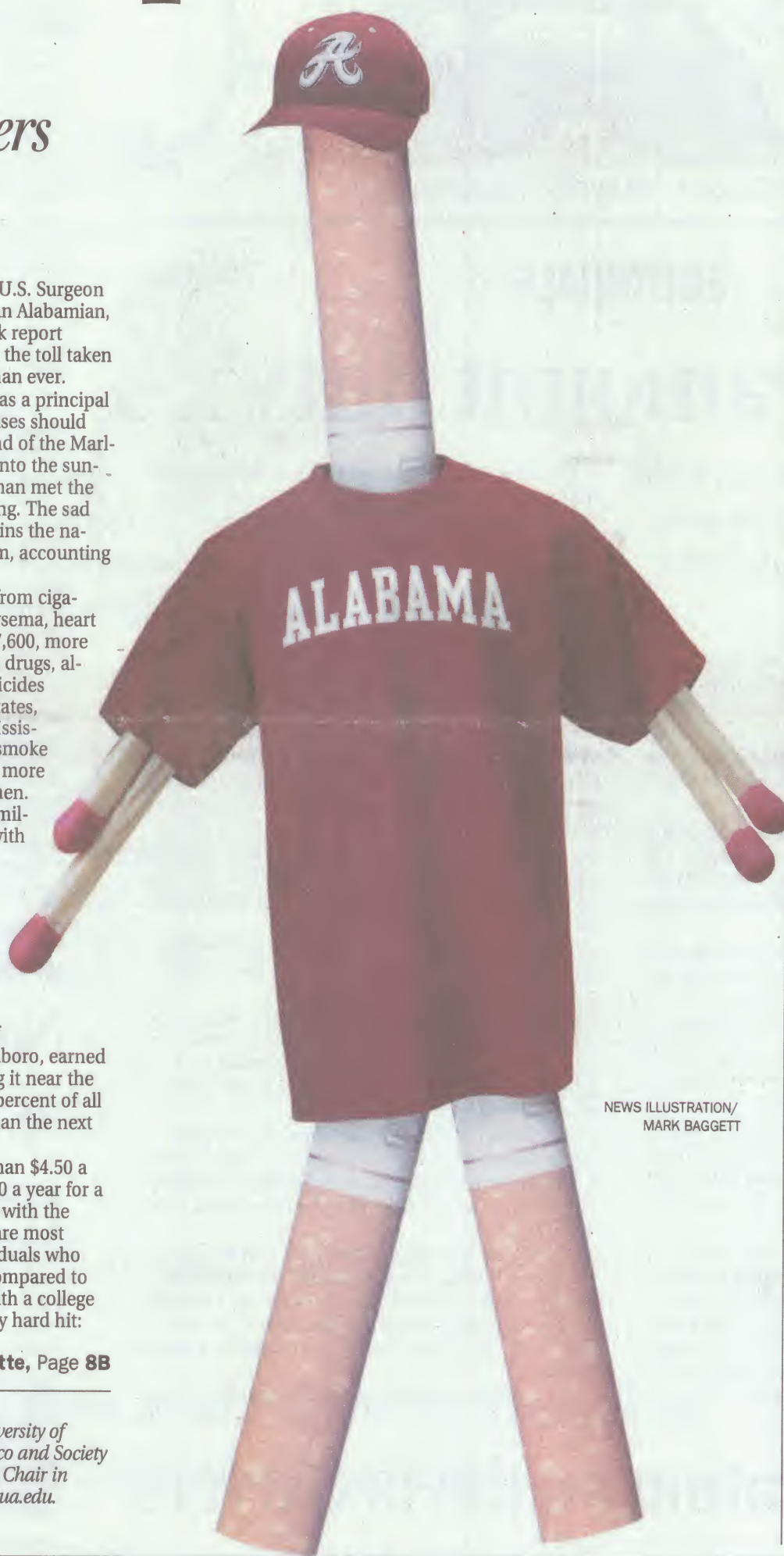
And we're paying a price: Alabama's Medicaid expenditures for smoking-related illness cost taxpayers well more than \$200 million last year; annual lost productivity due to smoking now approaches \$2 billion.

On the other side of the ledger, last year Altria, parent corporation of Philip Morris USA, the maker of Marlboro, earned more than \$5 billion in profit, putting it near the top of the Dow Jones average. Forty percent of all cigarettes sold are Marlboro, more than the next seven brands combined.

So who is still coughing up more than \$4.50 a pack in Alabama, or more than \$1,600 a year for a 20-cigarette-a-day addiction? Those with the least education and lowest incomes are most likely to light up: 40 percent of individuals who lack a high school diploma smoke, compared to just more than 10 percent of those with a college degree. Minority groups are especially hard hit:

► See Cigarette, Page 8B

Alan Blum, M.D., is director of the University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society and the Gerald Leon Wallace Endowed Chair in Family Medicine. E-mail: ablum@cchs.ua.edu.

NEWS ILLUSTRATION/
MARK BAGGETT

Mentally disabled Alabamians waiting

By ELLEN GILLESPIE

Imagine the predicament of an older widow, unable to lift her middle-aged son who has mental retardation, or to have any peace about where he may live once she is gone.

In a lawsuit filed in 2000, Susan J. vs. Riley, Alabamians with mental retardation and their families are seeking critical services for which they have been on waiting lists for many years. Many parents of people with mental retardation are older and can no longer meet the physical and mental demands of providing round-the-clock care for a dependent adult.

Alabama's Department of Mental Health and Retardation acknowledges that more than 1,400 people with mental retardation are on the department's waiting list for services.

Now, six years into the lawsuit that seeks to obtain needed services, Attorney General Troy King has moved a second time to have the suit dismissed, claiming the plaintiffs do not have a right to sue. He argues a lawsuit is not necessary, and that a federal judge should not tell the state what to do.

In an ideal world, the attorney general would be right.

In an ideal world, Alabamians with disabilities would not have languished for years on a waiting list while receiving no services. No lawsuit would have been necessary if Alabama had met the needs of some of our most vulnerable citizens and their families.

But we do not have an ideal, much less adequate, system of care in our state. Adequate funding to meet the needs of this population has never been made available. Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation leaders know the dire

► See Waiting, Page 8B

Ellen Gillespie, Ph.D., is executive director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program based at the University of Alabama. E-mail: Egillespie@adap.ua.edu.

Choose to make the grade, make a difference



DeMeco Ryans

By DeMECO RYANS

Life is funny. It changes in ways you don't expect and at times you don't anticipate. Take this essay, for example. As a football player for the University of Alabama Crimson Tide, I've been asked to talk with lots of reporters for lots of stories. Most of the time, I didn't mind. It goes along with the territory of playing for a

DeMeco Ryans, a recent University of Alabama cum laude graduate, was a consensus All-American linebacker for the Crimson Tide and was defensive MVP of the 2006 Cotton Bowl.

school with such rich tradition and passionate fans.

However, I was most excited to have the chance to write a piece that not only reflects on my career but, hopefully, points to some positive aspects of college athletics and college life that don't always make the sports pages. And in keeping with past media interviews, if I can offer any words that might serve to motivate high school students to make good choices about their futures, then I'm all over that.

Winning the NCAA Top VIII award brought honor to me, my family and my university, but it also gave me a voice, a platform to talk about some other important things. My college experience — tack-

ling my coursework, competing for the Crimson Tide, trying to give something back to my community — hasn't left much time to reflect. And while it's not yet clear where God may lead me next, it is clear that many people have helped me get to this point. I wanted to take this opportunity to say thank you to some of those who have helped me along the way and to encourage those who may read this — especially students — to always strive for your personal best, whatever that may be.

That's one of the things my mom emphasized when I was growing up. "Do your best. Work hard. Take advantage of the

► See Make, Page 8B

Moving along

Mass transit is losing its legislative torch-bearer with the retirement of state Rep. George Perdue, says editorial writer Eddie Lard. 2B



John Edwards

Running or not?

Former U.S. Sen. John Edwards, who ran for vice president as a Democrat in 2004, is roaming around again, with 2008 in mind, writes columnist George Will. 6B